

**DOWNTOWN  
COLORADO**  
inc.



**TOWN OF CENTER**  
REVITALIZATION REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

Downtown Colorado, Inc. (DCI) has a long history of working in the San Luis Valley (SLV) throughout its 40 year existence. The San Luis Valley is the rare region of Colorado that hasn't seen economic prosperity and growth for the local population despite the state's economic growth. In 2017, DCI was once again in the San Luis Valley, providing placemaking training for the City of Monte Vista. While there, the DCI Team drop in (unannounced) to say hello to Center's new Town Manager. Brian Lujan's (Center Town Manager) first reaction was common from small, rural leader who had too much to do and not enough time to do it - - yes, the Town needed downtown revitalization - but how could the Town focus on downtown when there were so many large pressing projects? In the end, Lujan took on the downtown challenge because it is focused on sustainable, long-term change.

Since hiring Lujan in 2017 and partnering with DCI in 2018 as a Challenge Community, the Town of Center has made significant tangible steps towards improving the quality of life of their residents. Early initiatives included correcting budget shortfalls, hosting placemaking events with DCI (resulting in six vacant downtown buildings purchased by new owners), and making infrastructure improvements necessary to support both current residents and future growth. Every year since then, DCI and Center have continued to evolve their partnership focusing on a strategy that includes holistic development and engaging people and resources through diverse methodology to meet the Town of Center's needs through planning and adaptability in objective areas.



# Phase 1

## UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

### UNDERSTANDING THE IMAGE

In 2018, Downtown Colorado, Inc. (DCI) worked throughout the San Luis Valley to assess the online image and audience for digital content. DCI worked with the Town of Center and Small Business Development Center, bringing together businesses to review current regional digital marketing; needs for other digital marketing; and what might help to strengthen digital marketing for the region. This process was funded in part by the USDA Rural Business Development Grant Program (RBDG). Prior to the meeting, DCI completed an online audit of demographics and the digital presence of the community from an outside perspective. The audit focused on identifying areas for enhancement and considering how to reshape messaging efforts.

Primary exploration of the online image assessment found that the Town of Center, like many small, rural communities, had primarily focused on driving tourism while the offerings in the community were really directed towards locals and the working migrant population. Limited guidance and support for economic development shaped online communications that encouraged a “day trip” to Center, though the community had little to no activities or stores for visitors. The first step for Center included restructuring efforts to address local engagement and inviting local investment in the community.



### Lessons Learned

The resources provided to rural communities for economic development have been largely focused on tourism. For many communities this is unrealistic and creates a seasonal economy or an expectation that if the community just focuses hard enough on outside interests, money will start flowing in. For the Town of Center, the tourism websites that suggested visiting the town would likely not yield any benefit as Center had no lodging and limited shopping options. The online image audit determined that the community could better use their time and marketing efforts to connect with locals and invite them to invest ideas, time, and money in the town.

## RESHAPING APPROACH TO REVITALIZATION

The Town of Center became a Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program Community in 2019 to participate in the Colorado Challenge Studio during the 2019 DCI IN THE GAME Vibrant Downtown Annual Conference. This unique program built a team to work with the community that included a University of Colorado School of Public Affairs Economic Development class, peer communities, and a broad array of consultants. At the IN THE GAME conference Challenge Studio Workshop, Town Manager Brian Lujan and South Central CHFA Community Relationship Manager Jeff Owsley created energy and excitement during their two-day charrette focused on developing a plan for Center.

Center sits at a crossroads of highways in the San Luis Valley. The community is a real place focused on locals, with a beautiful school, lovely historic buildings, and a people who love their town. Center has vacant buildings and available land, and Center wants business! The original Challenge question asked: How can Center reshape communications and partnerships to tell their locals they are open for business?

During the Pitch Session, which included a panel of funders, lenders, and investors, the Town of Center presented an approach of marketing the vacant buildings and properties as part of a Business Friendly Center Campaign. Town Manager Lujan emphasized that Center’s challenge was of the utmost importance because without a solution there will be no future for this town in 50 years. Center’s Challenge was to start with small steps toward long-term solutions that would guarantee the community’s viability. Following the dynamic pitch from Center, evaluators conferred and selected Center to receive a cash prize to incentivize engagement in an Entrepreneurship Competition.

There were four ideas that served as the key components of Center Challenge Pitch for future strategy - including both the Center downtown core and development of the North 90 (an 87 acre parcel owned by the Town):

- **Inventorying Assets in the Built Environment:** Creating a list of opportunity sites in the community and tracking details, ownership, and potential future uses.
- **Entrepreneurship for Youth:** Establishing stronger relationships and building a team of key partners focused on youth programming and training to share opportunities for investment of time, money, ideas, and leadership for the Town of Center vision.



- **Accessing Resources Around Redevelopment:** Using the asset inventory to consider resources, especially around brownfields to help property owners understand property status and needs for redevelopment.
- **Inviting Locals to Invest:** Building a series of communications, events, and outreach efforts to help the local population understand that the Town is a partner for those who want to solve problems, open businesses, and invest their time, money, and ideas in the future of Center.

engagement efforts forged stronger bonds with the Center Consolidated School District, the San Luis Valley Housing Coalition, and built trust and understanding with elected officials. The Town of Center Town Manager began to take a stronger leadership role in working on economic development in both counties that the Town encompasses, and in the larger San Luis Valley.

The Town Manager used the 2019 Challenge Studio and Pitch to continue to amplify the message that Center is Open for Business. The confidence with a strategy behind it, allowed for broader outreach to share Center's objectives which allowed for several strong collaborations to evolve. The Center initiative began to grow to include a three-pronged approach for holistic locally-focused community building. This approach included identifying resources for Housing, Property Development, and Youth + Workforce.



## Lessons Learned

Participating in the Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program as a small, lower income community with limited engagement presented a significant hurdle and a significant reward. Beyond finding money to participate, small town leaders must find the time to really focus on a deep dive into their future. They must also have trust in their elected officials and town staff (when applicable) that daily management issues won't supersede the long-term vision and implementation processes. While the initial work involved only the Town Manager and strong support from the regional Colorado Housing and Finance Authority representative, their passion helped to build confidence and add broader institutional knowledge. As these two San Luis

Valley leaders became immersed in ideas and resources as shared by peer communities and consultants, a strong foundation for success was established. With that foundational partnership, and the adjunct staff support from DCI, the Town of Center was able to return home and build momentum. The Town of Center team now boasts participation from all staff, elected officials, the school district, youth, partner non-profits, the Colorado Trust, AmeriCorps VISTA, Kansas State University, and a whole crew of consultants. The big takeaway is to start with the team you have in place, develop strong communications, and always invite ideas for how others want to invest (ideas, time, and money) in the town.

## HOUSING

CHFA partners helped the Town of Center build an enhanced partnership with the San Luis Valley Housing Coalition (SLVHC) and the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) in 2020 when the Town of Center served as a key partner in bringing together 23 local governments for a San Luis Valley housing study. The Town of Center served as the primary grantee from DOLA and advocated for the smaller communities in the Valley to have their own focus in the study.



As part of the Center outreach through the SLV, DCI and the Center partners engaged with efforts to expand mobility in the SLV through a mobility study. Center and partners encouraged the study to connect with housing discussions, as well as some of the health equity work being completed in the SLV. Aligning efforts to identify housing opportunities with the need for increased mobility is an important effort to building equity and sustainability for Center and the SLV.

Over time, DCI put together a strong team of committed experts in land-use, development, housing, finance, and more from around the state to help guide Center in achieving their goals. The Center team now includes several housing partners and is prepared to present the past work, concepts for the future, and field meetings

and presentations from community-minded development organizations looking to join the partnership.

DCI created a connection to the American Planning Association and brought their pro-bono Design-Preservation Rapid Assistance Team (D-PRAT) for its inaugural technical assistance project to map out potential uses and rendering for the North 90 Addition and assist with the revitalization of the existing town. These efforts were organized into an in-person summit in Center led by DCI on October 18-19, 2021 followed by a financing summit on December 1, 2021.



## INVITING PARTNERSHIP

Following the April 2019 Challenge Pitch Session, DCI and the Center team planned an elaborate implementation of the action plan starting with community engagement efforts. With a small staff, the Town of Center needed additional people-power to drive the identified objectives forward. DCI helped the Town to connect to partners, resources, and shape the communications for the revitalization effort.



DCI and the Challenge Studio fostered relationships with several state partners. The strongest relationship was developed between the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority (CHFA), who has maintained a primary role as a Center champion, and has assisted in helping other San Luis Valley communities follow the Center Challenge Approach. The process also helped build a stronger relationship with the Regional Manager for Department of Local Affairs, (DOLA) and connect with Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE). The local public

Most recently, the Town of Center received a HUD Section 4 Grant to bring in Mass Design, an international design firm, focused on meaningful community engagement around beautiful design for indigenous populations.

Following the engagement, the Town is planning for a three to five year build out for housing. The hope is to see a phased approach that plans for affordable housing needs combined with market rate opportunities, and will include light manufacturing and commercial as interest and investment opportunities develop.

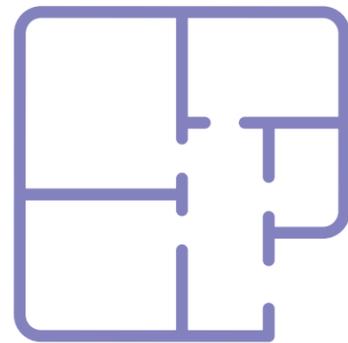


## Lessons Learned

The housing study showed both the need for housing, and the costs of commuting to work or housing. The Town can build on this data to share with local people how their quality of life may be impacted by investing in the local community and economy.

## PROPERTY REDEVELOPMENT

Additional partnerships - around property remediation and readiness - emerged from the 2019 Challenge Studio with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE), and Development Research Partners - who each came to visit and review Center's opportunity sites. A key factor in Center's redevelopment is reducing the barriers for redevelopment for existing building owners and troubleshooting areas that can be addressed in advance of development efforts.



DCI and the Town established a series of educational sessions for the community and Town Trustees to consider financing and different tools that could support housing needs in the community. Training and conversation proved to be another way to engage leadership in the process and simultaneously build a proactive approach to "stop kicking the can down the road."

Through the initial Challenge process, the Town identified 12 opportunity sites in buildings that had disinvestment and were largely vacant for close to thirty years. Through this process, nine of these sites have changed ownership and are seeing redevelopment. The process has built trusting relationships with the

owners and created a dialogue about the future of the community. One building was actually donated to the community for a space for the town's youth to program and use.

The Center Team is working with key partners to identify co-investment strategies. These strategies will allow the community to incentivize private sector investment to support the community vision. The community will use the needs from the housing study, ideas for workforce training, and the unique assets that the Town has to further the vision for the future.



## Lessons Learned

The housing study showed both the need for housing, and the costs of commuting to work or housing. The Town can build on this data to share with local people how their quality of life may be impacted by investing in the local community and economy.

## YOUTH + WORKFORCE

As the Town shifted to engage locals, connecting with youth became a primary objective. The Town engaged several leaders at the Center Consolidated High School who work with students through government, arts, business education or leading the capstone project efforts. The DCI and Center partners began expanded meeting efforts to connect community goals to the educational goals outlined by the educational partners. The initial stages of this work included creating an informal inventory of the efforts to build entrepreneurial and workforce skills for the young and underemployed in the community.

Since the inception of their partnership, DCI and Center have prioritized opportunities for youth while simultaneously supporting the Town's economic growth and diversification. As the pandemic hit in 2020, virtual meetings allowed for expanded audiences which also grew engagement. Efforts around youth entrepreneurship and workforce development caught the attention of more partners, and the Center Team was able to begin regular communication with the Center School District, ActionLab360, the Center Viking Youth Club. Boys + Girls Club has taken the lead on working with youth to shape the future. The prioritization of opportunities for youth, not only benefits the future of Center, but also the futures of the town's youth with the Town of Center's unprecedented steps to support these opportunities.

This ground-up initiative has taken enormous steps towards improving the present and future economy of Center and the San Luis Valley. These partnerships have supported efforts to develop an innovation center and foster youth entrepreneurship. In the fourth year of the partnership, Center has begun to take off with these efforts. DCI and the Town of Center shared the goals for youth development with private building owners and have secured the donation of a commercial space to be used for a youth-run innovation space in downtown Center. The program will work to expand the school's community focused capstone program. The youth-run innovation space and the real-world project based learning of the school's community focused capstone projects will help grow the economy from the ground up, provide real skills and experience to young residents, and begin lasting change to the opportunities of Center youth that will benefit the Town's future for years to come.



The Town's partnership with DOLA helped instill confidence to receive \$120,000 in 2021 for a Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) grant to create the Center Youth Enterprise Zone, the opportunities for youth are continuing to grow and are poised to make Center's future even brighter.

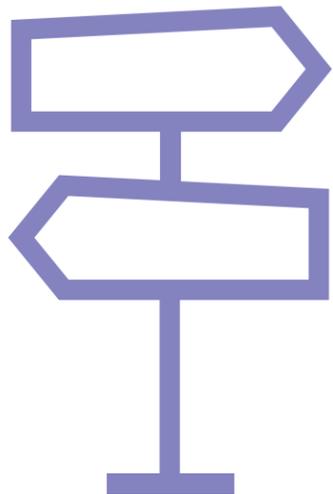


## Lessons Learned

Though the Center program started small and humble, the consistent communication of the goals and accomplishments fostered interest. Grass root efforts rarely start as a huge news story, but continued successes and growing participation in a small town creates a story in and of itself. The steady partnership and call to action brought the strong leaders of the San Luis Valley to watch as Center went from a "wait and see" place, to a "get it done" place.

## BUILDING REGIONAL COLLABORATION

While the Town of Center has been extremely active within their own community, they simultaneously worked with DCI to increase regional collaboration. The Town has become an advocate and leader working to bring together the interests of the small communities in the west San Luis Valley. Brian Lujan, Center Town Manager served on the SLV Economic Development Summit in 2019-2020 to help shape the dialogue around the needs of smaller communities. He also established more regular discussions with other communities such as Del Norte, La Jara, San Luis, and Saguache.



In 2021, the Town of Center took the initiative to form a regional team and participate in DOLA's Rural Resiliency and Recovery Roadmaps program. As the team lead, Center joined with the towns of Saguache, La Jara, Del Norte, the nonprofits of Upper Rio Grande Economic Development, the San Luis Valley Housing Coalition, and ActionLab360, and the Center School District. The two year program provides technical assistance for regional teams of rural communities to drive economic recovery, diversification and long-term resilience. They have set out to focus on three primary goals: Improving the Built Environment, Education and Workforce, and Being a Model Economy. Meanwhile, Center has worked closely with the San Luis Valley Housing Coalition to build on the results of the study and assist in a regional approach to solving the Valley's housing crisis.

## GROWING ENGAGEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

- This first community effort resulted in an impressive: **45 community vision survey respondents, 13 initial youth business ideas shared**, leadership meetings considering the needs for business and vision for the **87 Acre parcel**, **over 10 community partners** coming together to engage and celebrate Center, and approximately **50 participants in a community table** to share ideas for the future.
- Exploring community murals and design ideas through a public event engaged more young people and folks who had not previously come to meetings. An activity right on main street where people were able to share ideas for murals or design was well received.
- A community survey was then administered again in 2021 with **25 responses**. The trends remained similar, with a need for increases in certain services, youth activities, and diversity of career paths. Both this community engagement effort and the previous were integral in driving the direction of the Town of Center and its partnership with DCI. Many of the initiatives mentioned later on directly stem from these demonstrated community responses and desires.
- After identifying a strong desire for a community or recreation space, the **Town of Center partnered with two Center High School** capstone project students to gather more thorough community input. They **created and administered a survey** on a wide range of preferences for the space that has received **333 responses (and counting)**, including the voice of the entire Center middle and high school population.
- In total, during the 2021-2022 school year, **24 Center High School students created capstone projects** that further supported our Town vision. **2 students created a car show** that brought in 47 cars, **3 murals were created**, **50+ people participated in basketball open gyms** and a 3v3 basketball tournament, **100+ residents attended two movie nights**, **several thousand dollars in donations** were raised, and much more.
- In 2021, the Town of Center partnered with a local business in the Frontier Drive-In/n to create a **new food based public event named The Dish**. The event was planned by a committee of **13 motivated community members** from Center and Saguache and featured family recipes. And in 2022, this planning team had grown to 18 with the intention of putting on a **Center-based event for the entire San Luis Valley** and beyond in late-June. **The Dish SLV** will feature a cooking competition, food and drink, music, games, activities, and the Drive In/n's **first public movie in almost four decades**.



# Phase 2

## ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PLACE

As support for the implementation of the 2019 Center Challenge objectives grew, DCI and the Town focused on building awareness and maintaining momentum through placemaking and fun. DCI received a USDA Rural Business Development Grant to engage future entrepreneurs through placemaking. This funding allowed for a series of programs to reach potential and existing entrepreneurs to discuss options to invest.

## LIGHTS ON CENTER

DCI used the Challenge Studio stakeholder and team building process to generate contact lists and develop a community visioning survey. The results from the initial 2019 community visioning survey, showed that the community, especially the younger demographic, value the future of Center's businesses, the town, and the people in it. People love the welcoming community in Center and the rich culture. The community wanted

to see improvements in the appearance and liveliness of the downtown buildings, as well as providing space and opportunities for people to gather. It was especially clear that they want a safe and fun place for kids.

The next step was engagement through a fun and inviting event in Downtown Center. DCI began working with the Town to plan a large placemaking event called "Lights on Center" to take place in October 2019. Leading up to the event, the community was surveyed about their vision for the town. The event created momentum for the town's opportunities including engaging the community on their vision for businesses in Center, beautification ideas, and how the town could improve its interaction with citizens.



The "Lights on Center" event brought together community members and leadership, as well as regional and state partners to share both the impressive array of opportunities that Center has to offer entrepreneurs and investors and broad community engagement efforts to connect with and hear from local stakeholders about the future of the community. Through input during the "Lights On Center Event", the town gained more perspective on what the community values including: addressing existing business needs, the importance of gathering the community together, and ideas for adding a little color and fun. From this event, three areas really started to evolve further.

## YOUTH + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Before and during the event there were surveys, boards, a community table, and different games and activities to invite ideas from the community. The event's primary purpose was to raise awareness. The process worked with people coming out just to ask what was happening. The event included options to explore community murals and design ideas through a public event that engaged more young people and folks who had not previously come to meetings. An activity right on main street where people were able to share ideas for murals or design was well received. The other piece was all about building community pride. The members of the community were able to relive great memories and tie them to possibilities for the future.



## PLACEMAKING + SOLSTICE

In summer of 2021, the Center team had grown with public, private, academic, youth, and foundations involved. The ongoing support from CHFA had expanded into small grants for several small towns in San Luis Valley, including Center. The team wanted to bring together the different efforts with a Center Solstice event that celebrates the sun reaching its highest point in the northern hemisphere during June. With the coming of light and longer days, the community felt the desire to dance—literally and figuratively—in celebration of the sun. The next phase of placemaking brought together all partners in planning and telling the story of Center, in past, present, and future.

## CHFA PLACEMAKING GRANTS

As part of a San Luis Valley initiative, CHFA identified four communities to support with small grants and workshops around placemaking. The Town of Center was selected



and received a ModStreet Parklet as well as funding for a placemaking workshop for the youth in advance of the Solstice event. The placemaking workshop focused on community messaging that let them know what you can do, Yes Way Can Do. The idea is that most often communities only tell people what they cannot do (e.g. no parking, no loitering, etc.), so this exercise got youth thinking and acting to invite people to dance, to laugh, and to show their love for the community.

## LOCAL ARTISTS

As both local property owners and creative entrepreneurs, the local creative community turned out in full to plan and support the Solstice celebration. The downtown was filled with a stage, bands, circus performers, and even a large Yeti. The Taiko Drummers came from Crestone and a band with roots in the Valley headlined the event. Local artists created activities, showcased their work at vendor booths, and developed an open house featuring the downtown buildings that had been vacant and boarded up for so long. A member of the team researched the history of buildings in town and created a tour showcasing past and possible future uses.

## DEVELOPERS IN THE COUNTY

The Solstice event brought participation from Continuum Partners and the Frontier Theatre in unincorporated Rio Grande County. The group had purchased the Frontier prior to any of the Challenge Program work, but during this time they also purchased a theater in Downtown Center. During the event they hosted tours to share their vision and projects with the local community. It was a great learning experience for Center's locals and even the elected officials.

## FOUNDATION SUPPORT

As the Center project evolved, foundation partners at The Colorado Trust began to look at expanding in the area to focus on community organizing around specific partners with people and organizations across Colorado that are working to make positive changes in their communities. The Trust believed that the Solstice event was a great way to expand their outreach to community members. The Trust helped sponsor the event to be able to bring in opportunities for the community to come together and have fun. At the Solstice, the Trust had a booth to engage residents and schedule 1-on-1 interviews at a later date to better understand their needs for health equity. These interviews resulted in a partnership with the Town of Center. The Trust will start using their Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle (CPOC) which includes: relationship and base building, communal issue choosing, community power analysis and strategy development, action, reflect and evaluate.

## DOWNTOWN CAPACITY BUILDING AMERICORPS VISTA

The Downtown Capacity Building AmeriCorps VISTA joined the Town of Center in July 2021 and quickly began fostering the next phase of the Town's development initiatives. Their primary responsibilities included supporting partnership development and enhanced communications from the Town and SLV stakeholders, aiding the development of youth workforce training, innovation, and entrepreneurship curriculum, and furthering downtown initiatives. These efforts included vacant building activation, beautification, promoting anti-displacement policy, and raising funds to achieve these goals.



## Leader Highlight



### Brian Lujan

Brian epitomizes what it means to be a doer. Since joining the Town of Center as its Town Manager in 2017, his infectious energy and unrelenting drive to support Center and its residents have begun to transform the small agricultural town into a model for rural revitalization. While DCI has played an integral role in Brian's success, it is Brian who brings their visions to reality, and even several steps further.



# Phase 3

## GETTING IT DONE IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

### UTILIZING TAX INCREMENT FINANCING

In an effort to most effectively promote beneficial redevelopment, DCI has worked closely with the Town of Center to develop an Urban Renewal Authority (URA). To help achieve the Town's redevelopment goals, some additional tools are needed. A URA is an ideal tool to help the Town develop the North 90 Addition, revitalize their downtown, and redevelop vacant lots and abandoned structures. Whether it be through the use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) or the other capabilities allowed with a URA, the Town has spent significant time pursuing this strategy. First, DCI partnered with consultants to offer multiple board training on URAs to Center's Town Board. Once the board decided it was something they wanted to pursue, the Town applied for and received a \$20,000 planning grant to complete the necessary studies to consider the creation of a URA. Currently, the Town is in the process of performing a conditions survey and a fiscal impact report with the intention of applying for the creation of a URA and a URA project when complete.

### CURBING DISPLACEMENT

With all of DCI and the Town's efforts to make Center a better place to live, they have also worked hard to ensure it is a place where local residents do not get displaced. DCI has helped Center identify, explore, and adopt regulations, policies, and protections that keep Center a great place to live for both locals and newcomers. On October 18th and 19th 2021, DCI and a team of policy experts met in Center to discuss these topics and develop a vision, guiding principles, and specific policies to achieve these goals. Moving forward, Center has continued to bring these practices into their other initiatives, such as the development of the North 90 Addition. Although other Colorado towns have faced rampant displacement, the assistance of DCI has left Center confident they can support both meaningful improvement to the Town and the futures of their local residents in the Center community.

### EDUCATION FOR ELECTED LEADERS

The Challenge Program and work with DCI has played a vital role in the positive development of Center through how they have educated and supported the Town Board. The elected officials of the Town represent

the citizens, make the most important decisions, and are the ones that truly decide the vision for Center. If it wasn't for the assistance of DCI in training the Town Board, many of the most important projects for Center residents would have never gotten off of the ground. DCI was able to use their vast network of resources, contacts, and expertise to offer numerous training on topics like forming an Urban Renewal Authority, adjusting zoning and codes, strategies for placemaking and community outreach, how to map opportunities for the North 90 Addition, and much more.

### GRANTS FOR FACADE IMPROVEMENT

In the Fall of 2021, the Town of Center was awarded \$114,588 through DOLA's Main Street: Open for Business grant program to make facade and energy efficiency improvements to five businesses in Downtown Center. These businesses received everything from new exterior paint, to complete roof replacements, to new windows and signage, even to the addition of rooftop solar panels. At the same time, these improvements encouraged improvements in additional downtown businesses who were not included in the grant. Two buildings repaint their facades for the first time in years, another building upgraded its sign and logo, and another upgraded its heating system.



### FOOD COMMUNITY BUILDING

The Town of Center has been working to build community pride, bring people together, and offer more to their residents and so decided to begin hosting food-focused community events. After decades of stagnation, the Town of Center is a place people are proud of, with activities and opportunities for residents to find joy in the community. To make this happen, the Town partnered with the Frontier Theatre in the fall of 2021 to host a community meal titled "The Dish", featuring the signature dishes of 10 home chefs from Center and Saguache while highlighting the meaning behind each dish. The event brought communities together, celebrated local cooking and home cooks, and was a fun place with music and festivities. Due to its success, the Town, Frontier, and community chefs decided to host an expanded event in June 2022. Now, the bulk of the planning is done by a large contingent of community members who want to bring the events they want to see to their community. Currently, there is a much larger competition model event scheduled for June 2022, complete with live music, games for kids, and more. And at this point, these community leaders show no signs of stopping with these new food events.

# BLENDING + BRAIDING RESOURCES

## DCI Membership

As part of the Colorado Challenge Accelerator program, the Town of Center received a Challenge Community Membership. A Challenge Community Membership includes collaboration, On-Site Technical Assistance, Networking & Educational Events, Development & Improvement District Support, Marketing Opportunities. This membership has benefited the community immensely, therefore they have budgeted the membership fee since 2019. This membership is \$1,000 yearly.

## USDA RDBG Grants

o In 2018, DCI was pleased to receive a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Business Development Grant (RDBG) to support our project, Digital Marketing for Creative Entrepreneurs. The project included two phases: First, Planning for Regional Attraction and second, Digital Marketing for Creative Entrepreneurs. Through the grant, we were able to work closely with the Town of Center. DCI hosted stakeholder meetings in each community to learn more about their individual needs, audited their digital presence, and created action plans for each town to help strengthen and unify their online community identity. The second phase of the project worked with select businesses from each community to audit and upgrade their website. Each entrepreneur partnered with DCI to develop a strategic digital marketing plan for their business.

o In 2020, DCI received a Rural Opportunity Grant to work with Alamosa, Center, and Monte Vista for placemaking efforts in the San Luis Valley, to assist in inventorying opportunity sites and connecting to possible investors to solve challenges in the community. Through this program DCI was able to engage with community surveys, and begin holding virtual public meetings and training called, Creating a Buzz with Business, with consultant Brian Corrigan.

## American Planning Association Design Preservation Rapid Action Team (APA D-PRAT)

The American Planning Association's Urban Design & Preservation Division brought their unique skills as planners and preservationists to the Town of Center, Colorado in a pilot program called the Design-Preservation Rapid Action Team (D-PRAT). The goal of the project was to brainstorm options for the future of the Town of Center focusing on the downtown revitalization and the 90 acres to the north of the town. The recommendations lay out a plan for the Town of Center to balance preservation and growth, to enhance the town's sense of place, and to empower the future of the community. Overall, the D-PRAT found that the Town of Center has a unique identity, engaged youth, and strong leadership. With the right planning tools, the Town of Center will be a focal point in the San Luis Valley and in Colorado. The value of these services would typically be valued at \$20,000.

## DOLA Planning Grants

Since partnering with DCI, the Town of Center has received two DOLA planning grants to support their efforts. In 2018, the Town of Center received \$10,000 from DOLA to participate in DCI's Challenge Community Accelerator program and to help conduct a placemaking community event. These efforts helped jumpstart the relationship between DCI and the Town and in 2021 the Town of Center received

another \$20,000 planning grant to support the predevelopment process for the North 90 Addition, a 90-acre mixed-income culturally and environmentally sustainable neighborhood in the Town of Center.

## Kansas State University TAB

The Town of Center was selected to work with Kansas State University's Technical Assistance to Brownfields (TAB) to receive economic redevelopment assistance. The TAB consultant will help the Town of Center promote beneficial development in Town by preparing it for growth and helping to position its opportunity sites for redevelopment. Some of the specific elements the consultant will assist with include: updating the Redevelopment Opportunity Site Inventory, developing high-level evaluations of viable reuse scenarios, creating Term Sheets on positioning sites to market, supporting Development Agreements, and much more. This service is valued at \$15,000 for the consultant services.

## CDPHE Brownfields

The Colorado Department of Public and Health and the Environment (CDPHE) visited Center in 2019 to assess brownfield sites and create an initial inventory of potential projects for remediation.

## CDLE Electric Vehicle Charging Stations

As Colorado continues to increase its focus on electric vehicles, the Town of Center took advantage of the opportunity to meet this need by installing an electric vehicle charging station. This came about when Saguache County Tourism offered a grant for charging stations to be placed in downtown Center. While this is just a small action, it represents another step of the Town of Center's deliberate approach to preparing itself to be a successful Town in the future of Colorado.

## Private Sector Investment

After decades without any significant investment, the Town of Center has seen unprecedented private sector investment since they began their partnership with DCI in 2018 to encourage investment and bring in business. Nine properties in the historic downtown that had been vacant for decades have been purchased by new owners. Each of these properties currently features new businesses or are under renovation with new businesses to come soon. Continuum Partners, internationally renowned developers of Denver's Union Station and more are finishing their first stage of development of an innovative artistic hospitality space in a drive-in theater they purchased on the outskirts of town. To support this project, they have also purchased an old, abandoned movie theater in downtown Center. And in 2021, they received a \$500,000 community revitalization grant to rebuild and refurbish this theater to its former glory. However, the investment has not only been from the outside. There has also been an increase in local investment. This led to the opening of a Mexican goods store in a vacant building downtown. Center natives also purchased a large plot of land to begin the development of housing, addressing a well understood and vital community need. There has also been high levels of local interest in buildings that five or ten years ago would have had no interest. However, this investment is only expected to grow with the continued efforts of the Town, DCI, and their redevelopment consultants.

## HUD Section 4

The partnership of the Town of Center and the San Luis Valley Housing Coalition (SLVHC) applied for and received \$25,000 through the Enterprise HUD Section 4 federal grant to perform community engagement and visioning work for the North 90 Addition. This grant will be used to bring on Mass

Design Group, a world renowned design company known for their focus on equity. They will help connect with the Center community and determine what the community desires for the 90 acre property. However, it is important to note that it was DCI who connected with Mass Design and identified this grant for the Town of Center to apply for. Again, DCI has been integral in moving the needle to make development happen in Center.

## CDOT RISE Grants

The Center School District is one of seven public school districts in the San Luis Valley working with Adams State University under Colorado's Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) fund to address learning challenges related to the economic, social, and health impacts of COVID-19. More specifically, this grant has brought the services of ActionLab360 to the Center School District which has made an enormous impact on youth opportunities in Center. Together with ActionLab360, the grant has led to the creation of a new entrepreneurship curriculum, expanded capstone projects, increased student and school involvement with the Town, and supported student stipends and internships. However, the RISE grant is only the beginning, and much of this work will be expanded on with the Town's REDI grant award for the Center Youth Enterprise Zone.

## Colorado Trust

As the Center project evolved, foundation partners at The Colorado Trust began to look at expanding in the area to focus on community organizing around specific partners with people and organizations across Colorado that are working to make positive changes in their communities. The Trust provides funding and other resources so that all people have the power to make decisions that improve their lives and the lives of their neighbors. The South Central region of the Trust has presence in three communities in the San Luis Valley and was looking to organize a fourth around health equity goals. The Community Organizer from the Trust interviewed many citizens and decided to recommend a partnership with the Town of Center. They will start using the Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle (CPOC) which includes: relationship and base building, communal issue choosing, community power analysis and strategy development, action, reflect and evaluate. This is the beginning of the relationship but there are many opportunities as shown by other SLV Trust organizations.

## Main Street Open for Business Grant

The Town of Center was awarded \$114,588 in 2021 for facade and energy efficiency improvements to five buildings in Center's traditional downtown through the Colorado Department of Local Affairs' (DOLA) Main Street: Open for Business (MSOB) grant. Four of these house traditionally disadvantaged business enterprises (DBEs). While these upgrades range from new signage and exterior paint to full roof replacements, their impact on Center's downtown has been immense. For the first time in decades, Center residents are seeing improvements to their downtown and are becoming excited. Moreover, the improvements made by these grants have encouraged other businesses to make improvements to their buildings and their appearances on their own. Combine this with the complete renovation of downtown buildings from several new owners and downtown Center is poised to finally become a point of pride for the community.

## Rural Economic Development Initiative

The Town of Center was awarded two Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) grants since

partnering with DCI. In 2020, the Town of Center was awarded \$144,000 as a pass through grant for Continuum Partners and the Frontier Theatre to cover the planning and engineering costs for an extension of Center sewer and water lines to their new hospitality and tourism location 2 miles out of Town. This effort will support and expedite the development of what represents a new creative industry and employer in our region. And in 2021, the Town of Center was awarded \$120,000 for a Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) Grant for the Center Youth Enterprise Zone, a 360° educational experience for youth 12-22 merging academics with real life opportunities. This grant builds off of the work of the RISE grant and the initiatives already underway with the school capstone curriculum and the downtown youth-run innovation space. It helps continue the support for entrepreneurship curriculum, further helps build the downtown innovation space, provides technical workforce training, internships, and apprenticeships, and offers student stipends, among many other offerings.

## UC Denver Capstone Student

- o The Town of Center applied for and was accepted to work with a capstone student from the University of Colorado Denver's Masters School of Urban and Regional planning to develop a streetscape design and plan for Hwy 112 within Center. The design will demonstrate how to improve safety, upgrade the image of Center to drivers, and draw visitors to Center businesses and the Town's downtown commercial district.
- o UC Denver Capstone Project: The Town of Center was also accepted to receive the support of CU Denver Architecture professors and graduate students to perform a redesign for the Center Community Park and Sports Complex. The redesign is meant to improve the park to better meet community needs, support larger athletic competitions, and be a point of pride for the Town for decades to come. The team is also exploring the feasibility of a recreation center. Importantly, this process will require significant community engagement so that the design best and most realistically meets the needs and desires of Center residents. Two juniors from Center High School are working with this team as part of their capstone on surveying and researching community desires to ensure they are reflected in the design.

## Regional Roadmaps Project

The Town of Center put together a regional team and elected to serve as the team lead in Colorado's Rural Resiliency and Recovery Roadmaps Program. The program provides technical assistance for regional teams of rural communities to drive economic recovery, diversification, and long-term resilience. Joining Center's regional team are the towns of Saguache, La Jara, and Del Norte, Saguache County, the Center School District, the San Luis Valley Housing Coalition, Upper Rio Grande Economic Development, and Action Lab 360. They are currently within the two year program that should aid the Town in meeting community needs and supporting economic and community development through achieving the goals of improving housing, workforce development, and creating a model economy.

## Best and Brightest Students

The Town of Center will have four high schoolers working with the local government through the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) Best and Brightest Internships. All four of these students are juniors at Center High School who have been selected for their achievement and their interest in local government and public service. Two are working to help the Town with community engagement efforts through surveys and research, while the other two are editors of this newsletter. Not only will these students get hands-on experience working with local government, the Town of Center will benefit immensely from their efforts and skills.

# ABOUT US

## DOWNTOWN COLORADO INC.

We are committed to building downtowns that are prosperous, equitable, creative, and welcoming. Our work focuses on establishing community-wide partnerships to facilitate and encourage community engagement for increased economic vitality. DCI is a nonprofit, membership association committed to building better communities by providing assistance to Colorado downtowns, commercial districts, main streets, rural communities and town centers. Established in 1982 as Colorado Community Revitalization Association and now dba, Downtown Colorado, Inc. provides five core services to organizations and individuals engaged in downtown and commercial district development: Advisory Services, Educational Events, Advocacy and Information, Downtown Financing Mechanisms and Colorado Challenge Program.

### Colorado Challenge Program

DCI's Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program is a team building accelerator focused on establishing a plan of work and proposal that engages public, private, and non-profit partners to address a significant community challenge over the course of 12 months. The Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program works to transform the community's real-world challenge into an opportunity for growth and impactful change by identifying solutions, establishing a tangible action plan including a financing approach, and identifying a team of community partners ready to implement the plan of action.

### Benefits for Members

Whether you're looking to connect with others in the industry, collaborate on projects, further your career or gain insight to proven tools and resources to support your organization, DCI membership offers something for you.

### Access to Community + Ideas

In this industry, you're not alone. DCI members have instant access to peers around the state willing to share ideas, lessons learned, opportunities and challenges. DCI membership provides you with opportunities throughout the year to connect with other experts and professionals in the industry, form relationships that last a lifetime, collaborate on ideas and projects and network with others looking to solve similar issues.

### Education, Training + Professional Development

DCI members can take advantage of numerous opportunities for career advancement, educational opportunities and industry-wide training throughout the year. Whether attending an event hosted by DCI or a member community, the chance to grow your network and skill sets abound. DCI provides renowned events and training for every sector, professional level and budget so whether you are a CEO, a marketing coordinator or a board member, there is something for everyone.

### Tools + Resources

DCI members receive instant access to an array of reports, case studies, planning documents, library of educational sessions, and more.

Partners Engaged: DOLA, CHFA, APA, SLV Housing Coalition, Mass Design, Colorado Trust

## FUNDING

- **DOLA Planning Grant #1 - \$10,000**  
DCI Economic Development Assistance and Conference
- **DOLA Planning Grant #2 - \$20,000**  
Center North 90 Development Plan
- **DOLA Planning Grant #3 - \$60,000**  
Town of Center - SLV Housing Study and Action Plan
- **Energy/Mineral Impact Assistance Fund Grant - \$5,000**  
Center Small Business Development Plan
- **Enterprise HUD Section 4 Capacity Building for Community Development and Affordable Housing Grant - \$25,000**  
North 90 Pre Development Planning
- **DOLA Main Street Open for Business (MSOB) - \$114,588**  
Downtown Facade and Energy Efficiency Upgrades
- **DOLA Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) Grant #1 - \$144,000**  
Center Water and Sewer Extension
- **DOLA Rural Economic Development Initiative Grant (REDI) #2 - \$120,000**  
Center Youth Enterprise Zone
- **DOLA Best and Brightest Management Internship / Fellowship Program - \$1,000**  
High School Interns
- **CDOT Safe Routes to School (SRTS) - \$750,000**  
Sidewalk and Pedestrian Safety Improvements
- **Energy and Mineral Impact Assistance Program (EIAF) - \$1,000,000**  
Center Automated Water Meter Infrastructure (AMI) System
- **Saguache County Sales Tax Grants (Multiple) - >\$20,000**  
Assisting in Festival Events, Housing Needs Assessment, Youth Entrepreneurship,
- **DOLA Energy and Mineral Impact Assistance Fund Grant - \$90,000**  
Asset Inventory
- **DOLA Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) - \$600,000**  
Valley Wide Dental Facility
- **DOLA Conservation Trust Fund Grant - \$8,000**  
Community Performance Stage
- **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) - \$284,527.92**  
COVID Relief Funding
- **Colorado Tree Coalition - \$1,180**  
Plant New Trees
- **Colorado Housing and Finance Authority - \$20,000**  
Placemaking

**Rough Total: \$3,273,295.92**

## DONATIONS

- El Pomar - \$5,000 for End of Summer Bash
- The Dish - \$8,100 raised total from following sources

- K&J Thriftway
- Center Tire Store, Inc.
- Jones Oil Company
- Wenta Nip & Sanitizing
- RG Bank
- The Rainbow Grocery
- Kentucky Belle
- Miner's Restaurant
- SLV REC and Cielo
- Stones Farm Supply
- High Peak Event Company
- Alluvium Studio (Steve and Krystal)
- Waste Management (Donating Trash)
- Brown's Septic
- Frontier Theatre
- Valley-Wide

**Rough Total: \$13,100**

## VOLUNTEERS

Countless volunteer hours were contributed through in-kind services by consultants, student volunteers, and community members at events and educational meetings.



“The Town of Center is revolutionizing rural development. The community and its leaders have led a historic collaboration effort to innovate community and economic development. Center has streamlined land use planning, urban renewal formation, and community outreach to create a first of its kind public private partnership in the San Luis Valley. This iterative and creative approach will bring new development to Center that matches the communities desires and needs.”

**Andrew Arnold, AICP, Economic  
Development Planner, Short Elliott  
Hendrickson, Inc.**

**DOWNTOWN  
COLORADO**  
inc.

This project funded by the Colorado  
Department of Local Affairs.

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